China’s Conflicting Signals: A local official attacks Three-Self churches in Zhejiang while a high-level official meets House church leaders in Beijing

Turning Jerusalem into a Christian Mecca among Christians in Africa and beyond: How should we respond?

Developing Young Leaders with Disabilities: A ministry beyond our wildest dreams?
In this issue we focus on the witness of the churches in war-torn Syria and how we can support and learn from them; the questions raised by the Chinese government cracking down on registered churches while at the same time initiating dialogue with House church leaders; the trend among some Christians towards turning Jerusalem into a Christian Mecca and how we should respond; and on how developing young leaders with disabilities strengthens the body of Christ.

‘The churches in Syria (and Iraq) are facing major challenges amid the current regional crisis’, writes an anonymous Syrian pastor. The church was not prepared to deal with persecution or oppression, but is catching up rapidly. Caring for people of other faiths was not a priority before, but now evangelism and social action are going hand in hand. In the last two to three years, Lebanese and Syrian pastors say they have seen more Muslims come to faith in Christ than in their whole lives. God is bringing them as refugees to hear the gospel. The church has a brighter future. It will continue its witness with help from Christians from other lands, but it can do much more than in the past. Christians outside the region should become more aware of what is going on, arming themselves with good information—not just about the bad news, but about the good things God is doing. Prayer is crucial. ‘We can learn . . . lessons for churches everywhere if we stand with solidarity with the church in the Middle East’, he concludes.

‘Even the experts are baffled. Legally registered Three-Self Patriotic churches are under attack while the illegal House churches are invited into official dialogue. Is China heading for another Mao-era persecution or opening up to an era of religious freedom?’ asks David Ro (Director for the Christy Wilson Center for World Missions at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary). House church legalization would be hotly debated, but would have many benefits. One of the most significant is that a legal environment increases the scope to develop effective sending structures for sending missionaries abroad. As the country apparently moves in a Neo-Maoist nationalistic direction, we can expect more bad news to come. However, God is answering the prayers of the global church for China and its leaders. Good news is on the horizon because a God-timed spiritual working appears to be taking place in the hearts of some of China’s top leaders. ‘It does not make sense in this current political environment, but is God preparing China’s role in global missions?’ he concludes.

‘Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem have increased greatly within the last decade’, writes Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (Baeta-Grau Professor of Contemporary African Christianity and Pentecostalism at the Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana). However, in contrast to
Islam, Christianity neither privileges a particular geographical location as the centre of Christian practice nor sees any form of pilgrimage as critical to the expression of faith. There is no such thing as ‘Christian culture’ or ‘Christian civilization’ in the sense in which there is Islamic culture or Islamic civilization. The principle of the incarnation, with God translating into flesh, brings Jesus Christ to the heart of each culture. God is spirit and those who seek to worship him must do so in spirit and in truth. Visits to the land of the Bible can help people to connect what they read with what they experience. ‘However, Christians need to be careful not to institutionalize religious tourism to Jerusalem in a way that seems to suggest that it is mandatory for achieving the fullness of life that God makes available to us in Christ Jesus our Lord’, he concludes.

‘There is a disappointingly small number of leaders with disabilities in local churches and other Christian organizations’, writes Dave Deuel (Senior Research Fellow for the Christian Institute on Disability). However, there is hope, and we can rejoice in the progress that they have made. God has prepared and gifted some people with disabilities for such leadership roles. This will unquestionably strengthen the body of Christ, for all parts will be serving. Also the church needs to learn from their wisdom gained through suffering. They can offer spiritual insights into physical, emotional, and social suffering that the church needs to hear. If we remove the obstacles in their path, the church will discover that many are gifted deacons, teachers, pastors, and missionaries. They will also be able to reach into the disability communities to evangelize, equip, and train the next generation of effective disability leaders. ‘Opening doors for young leaders with disabilities will be a ministry beyond our wildest dreams and bring us irresistible joy’, he concludes.

Whether you are planning to read the full articles or just the executive summaries, we hope that you find this issue stimulating and useful. Our aim is to deliver strategic and credible analysis, information, and insight so that as an influencer you will be better equipped for the task of global mission. It’s our desire that the analysis of current and future trends and developments will help you and your team make better decisions about the stewardship of all that God has entrusted to your care.

Please send any questions and comments about this issue to analysis@lausanne.org. The next issue of Lausanne Global Analysis will be released in March.
THE CRISIS IN SYRIA

How the churches are responding and how God is at work

A SYRIAN PASTOR
The churches in Syria, as they are in Iraq, are facing four main challenges amid the current regional crisis:

1. **Psychological shock**

For many years these churches were at peace, enjoying relative privileges. Christians were flourishing as a community in Syria and Iraq—they were well-educated, and held good positions in business, education, and government. Suddenly everything has been turned upside down in just a few years. When meeting Syrian and Iraqi refugees, one can see that the shock is still there, even after four or five years; they cannot comprehend what is happening.

2. **Displacement**

In the city of Homs, in the middle of Syria, which was repeatedly bombarded, the worst hit area was the Christian district. The Presbyterian Church in Homs, for example, was one of the strongest in Syria, but 80–90% of the Christians in Homs have been displaced. A few are now returning, but most homes and many churches have been destroyed.

3. **Migration**

Although no one has exact numbers, some 400,000–500,000 Christians have migrated from Syria in the past four years, many of them forced to do so. Not many will be returning. Christians formed 9–10% of the Syrian population before the war.

4. **Terrorism**

Christians are facing the atrocities not only of the Islamic State (IS) but also some 45 different terrorist groups in Syria, including some like Al-Nusra Front that are linked with Al-Qa’ida. Ever since 2011 in Syria, it was clear that there were terrorist groups seeking to take over and create an Islamic state. The actions of these groups also affect Muslims and the infrastructure of society more broadly, as well as Christians, but Christians are affected more. IS is doing this intentionally to control Christian areas, and in the future to eliminate the Christian areas entirely.

As a result, quite a number of Christian adults and children among Syrian refugees have gone through traumas which need addressing.
Churches’ responses

Churches and theological programmes inside Syria, and also in Lebanon, were initially taken by surprise. They were focused more on evangelism. They were not prepared to deal with persecution or oppression and did not know how to respond.

The church is catching up rapidly. At least five church networks in Syria are very involved with humanitarian aid to both Christians and non–Christians in their areas. This kind of social action is becoming a priority. Caring for people of other faiths was not a priority before, but now evangelism and social action are going hand in hand. Most churches are now reaching out and helping the displaced, the poor, and those impacted by war with aid and education services.

Caring for people of other faiths was not a priority before, but now evangelism and social action are going hand in hand.

Theological reflection

They are also starting to think more seriously, developing a theology of persecution—how to stand in persecution and a stance on resistance. Arab Christians were pacifist, especially in Syria and Iraq, never carrying arms even to defend themselves and their property. Some say they should have defended themselves. Reconciliation and forgiveness are now huge issues for the whole region.

As these issues surface, the church is responding. A Forum for Evangelical Thought in the Arab World, run by Langham Scholars Ministry in partnership with the Middle East Association for Theological Education (MEATE), has brought together theologians and pastors from Palestine/Israel, Jordan, Sudan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Syria twice in the last two years.

Openness to the gospel

As churches in Syria and Iraq start to be engaged with the non–Christian community in deeds of love and compassion, stories are emerging every week of conversions inside Syria and Iraq.

War has forced the church to engage with Muslims on their doorstep needing care. The church has had a wake-up call to engage with the Muslim community. Furthermore, churches in Syria have started to experience a unity that never existed before, even beyond the evangelical churches. This is giving them strength in numbers, in vision, and in encouraging one another to reach out.

Furthermore, IS atrocities inevitably have a deep impact on Muslims. Many Muslims are supporting the aspirations of IS, whether they say it in public or in private. They are disillusioned with secular governments and feel it is time to restore the glories of the past. This thinking encourages extremism and terrorism. It affects mainly poorly educated Sunni Muslims, both young and old.

On the other hand, many moderate Muslims are saying that this is not the Islam they believe in. Quite a number of them come to Christ when the gospel is presented to them.
Ministry among refugees

The refugee crisis is huge in Lebanon. There are an estimated 1.4 to 1.8 million refugees—more than in Jordan or Turkey. They are not confined to camps as is mostly the case in Turkey or Jordan, but they are everywhere. They bring economic and social problems to an already fragile country. Among the refugees there are many who are supportive of IS and other radical groups. Every week people are arrested by the Lebanese Army Intelligence for smuggling arms or money or giving other support.

Many churches in Lebanon are very much engaged with the refugees, offering humanitarian aid (medicine, food, organizing schools for children of refugees). There are 400,000 Syrian refugee children, but the Lebanese school system can take care of only 150,000 of them. The Baptist church in one city has a school for 300, while the Presbyterian Church in West Beqaa Valley is opening a school this year.

The church is taking the opportunity to reach out with the message of the gospel and Muslims are coming to faith. In the last two to three years, Lebanese and Syrian pastors say they have seen more Muslims come to faith in Christ than in their whole lives, mainly among Syrian and Iraqi refugees.

In general, they are coming to existing churches, but in some cases there are Muslim Background Believer (MBB) churches in the area. For example, some Lebanese churches have a separate service for the Syrian refugees. In one church, 80% of the refugee congregation are converts who have now been baptized.

Christian NGOs are involved, coming alongside the churches. The church in Egypt is also involved, while some Americans and Europeans (from Finland and Netherlands) have also come to help in Lebanon. So it is not only the work of churches from the Middle East, but contributions have come from the church worldwide.

God at work

In the midst of suffering and darkness, God is working in his sovereignty. There is a new spirit of Christian unity inside Syria and Iraq. Egyptian Copts are praying for Assyrian Iraqi Christians in the region (which they hardly ever did before). The churches are thinking about how not just to survive, but to thrive, and to make a contribution in the region.
Among the Muslims who are coming to faith in Christ are many from areas like northern Syria, where Christians would never have dared to go, such as Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa where IS is now in control. God is bringing them as refugees to Lebanon and Jordan to hear the gospel. For example, a very strict Muslim from Deir ez-Zor known to the author is now a committed Christian.

Outlook for the church

The Arab Christian Church has survived from the Day of Pentecost to now, nearly 2,000 years. It has had some good times as well as bad. It has survived pressure and persecution.

The question is not one of survival but of impact. Even with small, and diminishing, numbers, Christians have had a huge impact on society, education, the political systems, and the economies of the region.

The church has a brighter future. It will continue its witness with help from Christians from other lands, but it can do much more than in the past. Technology and communications tools give the churches new means. A new strong sense of identity and desire to work together will also help. Before the crisis, even evangelical pastors were reluctant to meet to pray together every few months. All that has changed.

Migration is a big issue, but the church has always been a minority. It was only a majority before the arrival of Islam, but in those times it was inactive. Numbers do not matter if there is the will to work together. The regional brain drain is a concern, especially among Christians. Church leaders are looking for ways to encourage young people to stay in Syria.

Suggested responses

Christians outside the region should become more aware of what is going on, arming themselves with good information—not just about the bad news, but about the good things God is doing. Prayer is crucial.

Christians in the region feel a sense of isolation and it is important to know that somewhere Christians, churches, and organizations are praying for them and thinking of them. Some thought the so-called Christian West would come to help, and were disappointed. Many feel that President Putin has said more encouraging words about Christians in the region than President Obama.

Financial aid in this time of crisis would be very welcome, whether, for example, to support the churches in their social work, or to help Christians who have lost their homes.

Here are some resources to help readers in their response:

- Heart for Lebanon
- The Institute of Middle East Studies
- Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding
- ‘Helping Syrian families get through a stormy and uncertain winter’
Wider lessons for the global church

Three lessons can be learned for churches everywhere:

1. The church needs to be prepared to face the reality of a hostile environment. The church was not well prepared for resistance, facing persecution, or reconciliation. The church needs to be doing ‘double listening’ (as John Stott called it)—listening to what God is saying through his Word, and what society is saying—and then to interact with its context.

2. In places where the church is a minority (whether in a secular or a religious society), it should not lose heart and hope. It was a minority at the start of its history. It can always have a right impact, whether through evangelism or through building up society.

3. The church must trust in God’s sovereignty and goodness in the midst of very hard circumstances, even if we cannot understand what is going on. A Syrian MBB, who was in prison for ten days in solitary confinement, said afterwards that he was expecting a miracle from God to open the doors, but instead he had a clear vision of the presence of God in the cell. An almost audible voice said to him: ‘False witnesses and close friends brought you here; they did the same to me on the cross.’ He said God’s presence was enough for him.

Habakkuk was a Middle Eastern believer. He asks the questions: ‘How long?’ and ‘Why?’ (Hab 1:2–4). The three friends of Daniel said: ‘Even if God does not deliver us, we will not bow down, and we will trust’ (Dan 3:15–18).

Many Christians in the Middle East are asking the questions that Habakkuk was asking, but at the same time they are trusting in God’s goodness and sovereignty in the midst of pain and destruction. Some are experiencing God’s protection, and others are willing to live for him, serve him, and obey him ‘even if’ they are not protected. There are many lessons that we can learn if we stand with solidarity with the church in the Middle East.

A Syrian pastor (name withheld), with David Taylor, Editor, Lausanne Global Analysis.

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CHINA’S CONFLICTING SIGNALS

A local official attacks Three-Self churches in Zhejiang while a high-level official meets House church leaders in Beijing

DAVID RO
Even the experts are baffled. Legally registered Three-Self Patriotic churches are under attack while the illegal house churches are invited into official dialogue. Is China heading for another Mao-era persecution or opening up to an era of religious freedom? With conflicting signals seen across a range of other social, economic, and political issues, times are confusing and nothing is certain. However, there is reason for optimism. The gospel is alive and something is about to happen.

**Attacks and talks**

Starting with the demolition of San Jiang Church in April 2014, Communist party Secretary Xia Baolong of Zhejiang province began attacking primarily Three-Self Protestant and Catholic Patriotic churches. Over 1,200–1,500 crosses have been removed and dozens of churches demolished in Wenzhou city, called the ‘Jerusalem of the East’.¹ Church attacks intensified in July 2015 with the burning of crosses on top of church buildings. Christian Lawyer Zhang Kai has been arrested and is missing along with 20 church leaders and activists.

As dark clouds surrounded Wenzhou, in June 2015 President Xi Jinping’s National Security Commission met a group of nationally recognized House church leaders in Beijing—the first such event in Communist China’s history. Officials asked for information on the size of the House church, differences with the Three-Self church, indigenous theology, House church revivals, the gospel heading westward, minority groups, cults, social responsibility, urbanization—and suggestions for house church legalization, bringing a glimmer of hope for the legal recognition of the House church.²

**Why would Beijing allow attacks on the Three-Self churches?**

One conjecture is that someone in the central government is testing the strength of the Three-Self church in the populous Christian Wenzhou region in preparation for a *nationwide campaign* to ‘indigenize’ Christianity with Chinese characteristics.³ Three-Self churches with huge buildings and highly visible red crosses appear to resemble Western cathedrals, in contrast to the less visible ‘indigenous’ House church Christianity which some officials may feel is more appropriate for China.

Another plausible explanation is *internal politics*. Xi is reforming the government to purge it of corruption and inefficiencies. Allowing the attacks to continue provides the central government opportunities for the reorganization of the United Front, State Administration of Religious Affairs, and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

The simplest explanation is that China overall is moving toward *conservative Neo-Maoist ideology*. An emerging leftist movement with nostalgia for Mao and a renewed nationalism is resisting liberals who are perceived as holding anti-China views of democracy, pluralism, and a free society associated with a Western-dominated world order. Christians have

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¹ LAUSANNE GLOBAL ANALYSIS

² With conflicting signals seen across a range of other social, economic, and political issues, times are confusing and nothing is certain.
appeared to align themselves with the liberals.\textsuperscript{4} With the popularity of Christianity growing, leftist forces in the central government are supporting a conservative provincial official in limiting the growth of Christianity.

Despite the attacks, the Three-Self church has in fact been strengthened by them. Stories of heroism among Three-Self believers strapping themselves to crosses as hundreds of police descend to attack have even moved House church believers. Several urban House church leaders signed a petition in support of the Three-Self church in Zhejiang. For the first time, House church leaders have crossed the divide to stand beside their former adversaries.

**Why would Xi open a dialogue with House church Christians?**

A convincing argument could be pragmatism: Xi needs to find a way to provide recognition for millions of Chinese citizens. Pessimists, on the other hand, would see Beijing luring House church leaders in order to bring them under government control. However, a key House church leader at the center of events views this recent dialogue in Beijing as representing a true change of heart within Xi’s administration:

‘From the receiving, communication, content, and signals given, the upper levels [of government] want to solve the problem . . . for the House church to truly have a legal status within Chinese society. This is our hope and prayer.’ This House church leader continues: ‘They have high hopes for the House church . . . they want the House church to be established based upon the Bible and eventually want to move toward a separation of church and state.’\textsuperscript{5}

**Significance**

If these statements truly reflect the views of the top leadership in the central government, then this recent dialogue can only be described as a spiritual breakthrough answering decades of faithful prayers for China.

The benefit is that for the first time, House church Christians, who have endured more than 60 years of persevering faith under extremely difficult conditions, would be legally recognized. This fulfills the vision of a Beijing pastor for the church in China to one day surface from being an underground movement to become a ‘City on a Hill, Light unto the World’ with a global mission force for the world.\textsuperscript{5}

**Outlook**

There are four possible scenarios:

1. **Persecution**: Three-Self and House churches come under attack in a national campaign.
2. **Status quo**: House church remains illegal and operates as usual under pressure.
3. **Legal status**: House church becomes legal within limits and with pressures.
4. **Separation of church and state**: Least likely and potential to be most dangerous for the church.

Even under the worst-case scenario #1, persecution would serve to strengthen and deepen the church, preparing for the church to surface another day.
A free scenario #4 would be wonderful, but could also be detrimental due to the challenges of materialism and consumerism.

Scenario #3 is the most likely as well as the most favorable for the church since freedom within limits provides enough operating space to expand, along with some pressure to keep the church sharp.

House church legalization would be hotly debated. While many urban churches and large rural networks would welcome this new openness, a good number of traditional House churches having experienced persecution would opt to remain hidden. Any involvement with the government is seen as compromising. Differences between the registered and unregistered House churches could divide the church for another generation.

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**China heading for another Mao-era persecution or opening up to an era of religious freedom?**

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**Benefits of legalization**

Many would caution against advocating toward moving to a freer society. The global church often idolizes the church in China as a model of Christianity flourishing under difficult circumstances, attributing the decline of the Western Christianity to too much freedom.

However, China would more likely follow another model, similar to South Korea in the 1970s to 1990s. Former persecution and sufferings produced a deep spirituality, preparing Korea for fast-paced church growth in a growing economy and a missions movement sending 26,766 missionaries abroad in 2014.

Legal status would have many benefits:

- House churches could rent or purchase facilities with legal protection.
- Underground seminaries would surface to train up future leaders.
- Sunday schools, youth groups, student and young adult ministries, family, marriage and counseling ministries, and church publications could mature.
- Christians could engage more openly in neighborhood community outreach, and in social concerns for the poor and elderly.
- Local NGOs, orphanages, and poverty and disaster relief with Christian witness would have more legal space to develop.

One of the most significant benefits is China’s future involvement in global missions. At the Mission China 2030 conference in Hong Kong in September 2015, 850 House church leaders and young people gathered around a visionary goal ‘to send 20,000 missionaries by the year 2030’. A legal environment increases the scope to develop effective sending structures for sending missionaries abroad.

The Three-Self and House church divide would slowly diminish and true reconciliation would begin. Another likely outcome could be the transformation of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement churches to become more like their House church counterparts: truly Three-Self in
being self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. A freer religious market would shut down Three-Self churches which have relied on government support and directives while healthy Three-Self churches would continue to grow.

**Uncertainties**

Many factors on the horizon could militate against Christianity in China. Xi’s battle with government corruption and the recent nerves over the slowdown to a new lower economic growth rate of 6.5% could cause domestic unrest or uneasiness for the foreseeable future. Nationalism and a desire for a stronger military continue to grow. Anti-American sentiment is also on the rise with the recent military frictions in the South China Sea. If Taiwan’s elections continue the country down a more independent path (as polls suggest) and Republicans win the White House in 2016, the United States and China could be heading toward a collision which could have a negative effect on the church.

Even with these uncertainties over the likelihood of a welcoming environment, a Beijing pastor is hopeful: ‘*Whether persecution comes or not, the church will continue to fulfill its missions. The time is ripe for the vision of Mission China 2030 . . . to send 20,000 missionaries by the year 2030.*’

**How should we respond?**

In preparation for the eventual legal status of the House church, we must remember some key points:

1. **The evangelization of China** should be the primary responsibility of the Chinese. Missions strategies should focus on seeking supporting roles in partnerships with indigenous churches. As House church leaders become legal, security concerns will be a lesser concern but any foreign involvement could be seen as meddling in domestic affairs.

2. Legal recognition of the House church opens the door for more specialized and professional ministries to flourish. Local churches will be developing their own specialized ministries along with para-church organizations.

3. China must adopt a learning posture in world missions. China must learn from the lessons and mistakes of the Western and Korean missions movements. The size of China’s influence alone could either greatly enhance or cause great damage to the gospel. In the area of overseas cross-cultural missions, the Chinese church needs the global church.

4. **We must be willing to sacrifice and go ourselves.** Chinese church leaders are watching to see who are sending missionaries. Chinese leaders have asked why mega-churches and ‘missional’ churches in the West are not sending any missionaries and wondered what can be learned from such shallow faith.
Conclusion

China’s complexities continue to confuse the global church. As the country apparently moves in a Neo-Maoist nationalistic direction, we can expect more bad news to come. Only time will tell, but hope is on the way. This is not because of pragmatism or signs of more favorable political conditions for the legal status of the House church.

God is answering the prayers of the global church for China and its leaders. Good news is on the horizon because a God-timed spiritual working appears to be taking place in the hearts of some of China’s top leaders. It does not make sense in this current political environment, but is God preparing China’s role in global missions?

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Endnotes

1. Editor’s Note: See ‘China’s Churches: Growing influence and official wariness present twin challenges’ by Thomas Harvey, Paul Huoshui, and David Ro in the July 2014 issue of Lausanne Global Analysis.

2. The closed-door meetings between officials and House church leaders were held on 16–18 June 2015 at a Beijing hotel. Officials gave House church leaders permission to release this news publicly during President Xi’s visit to the US in September 2015.


5. Rev Tianming Jin, ‘City on a Hill’.


Turning Jerusalem into a Christian Mecca among Christians in Africa and beyond
How should we respond?

J KWABENA ASAMOAH-GYADU
Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem have increased greatly within the last decade. Figures are difficult to come by, but from the United States, many parts of Europe, and Africa, Christian pilgrims visit the Holy Land in large numbers. On a recent visit in May 2015, the author was amazed at the thousands of people who had come ‘from every nation under heaven’ to visit Israel either as tourists or as Christians on pilgrimage.

This article discusses the growing importance of Jerusalem in contemporary world Christianity as the place of prayer. The focus will be on Africa, especially Ghana and Nigeria, but it is clear that we are speaking here of a global phenomenon. We will examine the implications of a proposed pilgrimage to Israel that was to be facilitated by the government of Ghana and its theological implications for a faith that does not attach any particular import to the earthly Jerusalem, the place of its historical origins.

Jerusalem as a place of intercession

In 2013, the government of Ghana faced public criticism for attempting to sponsor some Pentecostal pastors for such a trip. One of the reasons given for the pilgrimage was that the Christian leaders concerned would ‘intercede for the nation on account of its many socio-economic difficulties’. In a statement, the then Minister of Youth and Sports in Ghana noted:

> Over the years, various Christian and Church organizations have called on government to sponsor and address the various challenges that they have encountered during their holy trips to Israel. It is in response to all these several calls that the Government then decided to facilitate and coordinate the pilot pilgrimage to Israel to help address some of the challenges Christian groups have encountered on past trips, which is nothing new just as government has been doing for the holy Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. . . . For them the opportunity to trace the footsteps of Jesus Christ and walk where he walked, pray for their families, their churches, and their country is an opportunity they do not want to miss and a potential life transforming event.

The issue here is the emergence of Jerusalem as a place of effective prayer in the contemporary Christian imagination. A number of evangelical Christian leaders pointed to that as justification for the request to the government to sponsor a Christian pilgrimage to Israel.

Responses from churches, church leaders, and the various Christian ecumenical councils were varied, but the most common explanation offered by those in favour of the trip was that Christians were entitled to state sponsorship for pilgrimages to Israel just as Muslims receive to go to Mecca.

In Nigeria, there has been long-standing agitation for the sponsorship of Christian pilgrimages to Israel because of the support that Muslims receive for the hajj.
Worship in spirit and in truth

The religious and theological issues that arise from the proposal relate to the nature of Christianity itself. It is a religion that neither privileges a particular geographical location as the centre of Christian practice nor sees any form of pilgrimage as critical to the expression of faith. Religious pilgrimages occur in the different streams of Christianity, especially Catholicism, but Jerusalem does not have the same significance in the Christian faith as Mecca has in Islam.

Whereas in Islam, pilgrimage constitutes a major pillar of the faith, Christianity has no such historically recommended geographical centre of religious ritual. In fact, Christianity is about the only world religion that remains a minority faith in its place of origin. In the encounter with the woman of Samaria, Jesus found her trying to tie down acceptable worship of God to a particular location, including Jerusalem. The answer Jesus gave was swift and decisive:

Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know, we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:21–24).

Mecca, the original theatre of the revelation of Islam, has retained its religious significance for all Muslims, and this is demonstrated in the *qiblah*, the direction to which they turn in prayer. Jesus’ direction in terms of where to pray did not refer to any particular geographical location or place: ‘When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you’ (Matt 6:6). In this regard, Andrew F Walls speaking about the translatability of Christianity notes that, ‘Christians have no abiding city, no permanent sacred sites; their New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven at the last day.’

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Jerusalem in Christianity

Historically Jerusalem has had more significance for Christianity than any other city in the Middle East:

1. Jerusalem is the city in which Jesus went through the major events culminating in his crucifixion. Jerusalem also became in the interpretation of Jesus a symbolic representation of all that was wrong with Israel.

2. It is the city where the disciples were expected to wait for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the apostolic witness to the gospel was expected to begin from there.

3. It hosts some of the major landmarks of the Christian faith.

The reference in the Scriptures to Jerusalem as a ‘heavenly city’ has given its earthly version added significance. Theologically, Jerusalem has remained in the Christian imagination as a replica of the place where Christians will spend eternity. Thus hymns like ‘Jerusalem My Happy Home’ are commonly sung at Christian funerals as indicating the destination of those who serve God faithfully when they depart this life:

   Jerusalem, my happy home,
   Name ever dear to me!
   When shall my labours have an end,
   In joy, and peace, and thee?

For those who have had the opportunity to visit Jerusalem and its related cities for religious reasons, it has served the purpose of bringing the Bible alive in terms of some of the descriptions of the ministry of Jesus Christ.

In the course of the public discussion in Ghana and Nigeria on the appropriateness or otherwise of the proposed Christian pilgrimage to Israel, it emerged that some Pentecostal/charismatic Christians who had been there in the past had even sought re-baptism in the Jordan. During his visit to Jordan, the author witnessed many such baptisms of Christians both from the United States and Africa. Most explained baptism in the Jordan as being more authentic than an earlier baptism in other waters.

In the minds of those inclined towards its theological import, it is considered important to institutionalize pilgrimage to Israel in order to put it on the same pedestal as the Islamic hajj.

Whereas in Islam, pilgrimage constitutes a major pillar of the faith, Christianity has no such historically recommended geographical centre of religious ritual.

Christianity has no ‘Mecca’

Jerusalem ceased to be the centre of Christianity when Stephen was martyred. The risen Christ had indicated to the disciples that the promised Holy Spirit was going to be delivered in Jerusalem from which location Christian witness would also begin (Acts 1:4–8). This spread of the gospel from Jerusalem was to begin when, following the martyrdom of Stephen, a great persecution broke out against the church in that city and ‘all except the apostles were
scattered throughout Judea and Samaria’ (Acts 8:1). Subsequently, ‘those who were scattered preached the word wherever they went’, with Philip ministering in Samaria (Acts 8:4–8).

Andrew F Walls points out that there is no such thing as ‘Christian culture’ or ‘Christian civilization’ in the sense in which there is Islamic culture or Islamic civilization. Christianity has had several different civilizations, and as Walls notes, there may yet be many more. The reason for this lies in what he calls the ‘infinite translatability of the Christian faith’. 

The principle of the incarnation, with God translating into flesh, brings Jesus Christ to the heart of each culture. To that end, God does not privilege any culture; neither does he privilege any geographical location where he may be encountered. As Jesus Christ told the Samaritan woman, those who seek to worship the God who is his Father are simply required to do so, neither on the mountain nor in Jerusalem, but ‘in spirit and in truth’. In the words of Walls:

As the Incarnation took place in the terms of a particular social context, so translation uses the terms and relations of a specific context. Bible translation aims at releasing the word about Christ so that it can reach all aspects of a specific linguistic and cultural context, so that Christ can live within the context, in the persons of his followers, as thoroughly at home as he once did in the culture of first-century Jewish Palestine.

However, an important part of these developments that most of the arguments miss is that there is a whole Christian Zionism movement that has emerged within Pentecostalism in particular. An important international voice in this movement is the Catholic Charismatic theologian Peter Hocken who writes:

Israel is the soil of the incarnation. God’s dealings with the chosen people always reflect a relationship between the particular and the universal, between the chosen people and all the nations of the earth, for whose sake the elect are chosen.

The whole idea is that since Israel has a covenant with God through Abraham, those who help in seeking the good of Jerusalem will also be blessed. There is a whole new theology of blessing by association developing within Christian Zionism.

**Conclusion**

‘Meccanizing’ Christianity by seeking to hold Jerusalem as being as important to the Christian faith as Mecca is to Islam creates an important theological misnomer. Christian pilgrimages may be undertaken as important parts of personal and communal renewal. However, the statements of Jesus Christ and the subsequent post–resurrection history of the faith indicate that there is really no geographical centre meant to be the focus of Christian encounter with God.

In the words of Paul to the Athenians, who sought to domesticate God in the erection of a physical abode dedicated to an ‘Unknown God’: ‘From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined
the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps find him, though he is not far from each one of us’ (Acts 17:26–27).

In other words, God is spirit and those who seek to worship him must do so in spirit and in truth. Jerusalem may be significant for some reason but Christianity has no ‘Black Stone’ to which we are required to repair for religious credit.

Visits to the land of the Bible can be desired for what they are worth, that is, helping people to connect what they read with what they experience. However, Christians need to be careful not to institutionalize religious tourism to Jerusalem in a way that seems to suggest that it is mandatory for achieving the fullness of life that God makes available to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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Endnotes
3. Ibid., 29.

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Developing Young Leaders with Disabilities

A ministry beyond our wildest dreams?

DAVE DEUEL
At the climax of redemption history, when people from every tribe and nation come to worship the Lord on His holy mountain, persons with disabilities will be among them, singing praises with the rest. As preparation, our Lord Himself will make the blind to see and the deaf to hear. Perhaps for the first time, those unable to speak will sing, and those who are immobile will leap for joy. And they all will teach the redeemed to praise God for the hard-earned lessons of suffering.

**Developing young leaders is a biblically sustainable missions strategy**

In the harvest years of John Stott’s ministry when the fullness of life’s service brought serious reflection, he sought a better way forward. Stott concluded that training the next generation of young leaders should receive the highest priority. This was more than golden-years sentiment. He came to understand that developing young leaders would be one of the most strategic endeavors in missions. After all, our commission from the risen Christ is to evangelize, disciple, and plant indigenous local churches. A biblically strategic approach to all aspects of Jesus’ commission is to train nationals, particularly young leaders. This strategy would be even more effective if it included young leaders with disabilities, with a view toward reaching the one billion people with disabilities globally.

Who are people with disabilities? Roughly one in seven people across the globe are unable to see, hear, move about, speak, or think clearly. People with disabilities are much like anyone else except that, by God’s design, they have impairments. Most of us will experience disability at some point in our lives, particularly in our latter years. That said, the challenges facing people with disabilities sometimes seem insurmountable. The World Health Organization lists ‘10 facts on disability’ that address just some of those challenges. No wonder there is such a disappointingly small number of leaders with disabilities in local churches and other Christian organizations. The obstacles seem impassable. However, there is hope.

**Addressing the challenge**

We can rejoice in the progress that people with disabilities have made:

- Just several decades ago, we spoke about ministry to people with disabilities, where they were seen as merely passive recipients of our care.
- In response to the recognized need for mutual participation in ministry, we eventually began to talk about ministry with persons with disabilities.

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**10 FACTS ON DISABILITY**

**World Health Organization**

1. Over a billion people live with some form of disability.
2. Disability disproportionately affects vulnerable populations.
3. People with disabilities often do not receive needed health care.
4. Children with disabilities are less likely to attend school than non-disabled children.
5. People with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed than non-disabled people.
6. People with disabilities are vulnerable to poverty.
7. Rehabilitation helps to maximize functioning and support independence.
8. People with disabilities can live and participate in the community.
9. Disability barriers can be overcome.
10. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) promotes, protects and ensures the human rights for all people with disabilities.
Today, we might comfortably discuss ministry by, even under, but especially from leaders with disabilities.

Our choice of prepositions—to, with, and by—tells a beautiful story that is not finished. We have come a long way. And we continue to progress.

The Lausanne Movement addresses this challenge. With creedal force, The Cape Town Commitment states:

We encourage church and mission leaders to think not only of mission among those with a disability, but to recognize, affirm, and facilitate the missional calling of believers with disabilities themselves as part of the body of Christ.8

Indeed, Lausanne is committed to encouraging and facilitating people with disabilities in leadership roles in which they can serve according to their calling and gifts.9 The Movement’s vision statement is:

The Lausanne Movement connects influencers and ideas for global mission, with a vision of the gospel for every person, an evangelical church for every people, Christ-like leaders for every church, and kingdom impact in every sphere of society.10

People with disabilities can participate in connecting influencers and ideas for global mission, particularly within their sphere of influence in society.11 However, there are other benefits.

Selecting people with disabilities as church leaders will strengthen the suffering church

At least two considerations point in this direction:

1. Gifting

God has prepared and gifted some people with disabilities for leadership roles in local churches and Christian organizations. This will unquestionably strengthen the body of Christ, for all parts of Christ’s body will be serving. Scripture says that every member of the body is gifted to do some form of service. Consequently, if we do not encourage spiritual growth and ministry effectiveness for people with disabilities, we are dis-abling the body of Christ.

There are already people with disabilities serving in leadership roles, but they are comparatively few in number. Furthermore, people with disabilities have become leaders within disability networks and in disability organizations. People with disabilities also have successfully started their own organizations. These are signs of progress, but people with disabilities rarely serve as leaders of local churches.

This problem plagues the church in every country including the United States. It may be an even greater problem in countries where government and non-governmental programs are not easily available to support access and other forms of assistance. However, until the global church recognizes the great potential that people with disabilities offer our evangelism, discipleship, and commissioning for local church leadership roles, they will continue to fall between the cracks in leadership.12
2. Learning

The Church needs to learn from the wisdom gained through suffering that people with disabilities possess. People with disabilities can offer spiritual insights into physical, emotional, and social suffering that the church desperately needs to hear. Martin Luther described these insights as gifts to the body of Christ without which the church would become spiritually anemic. Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said: ‘We must learn to regard people less in light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer.’ Suffering is everyone’s greatest challenge in life. So, what do we need to do?

Preparing young leaders with disabilities requires current leaders to act

1. Remove obstacles holding back young leaders with disabilities

Scripture paints for us a beautiful picture of what it means to assist people with disabilities. In Israel’s law, the Lord says, ‘Do not . . . put a stumbling block in front of the blind’ (Lev 19:14).

The passage describes people with disabilities as moving along on the path of life. Stumbling blocks or obstacles get in their way and hold them back. God’s gracious law bids all of us to remove those obstacles for them. Without obstacles barring their way, people with disabilities can move along the path of life toward success just like anyone else. Crucially, the verse also tells us that assisting is one way that we Christian leaders fear the Lord. As Job said, ‘I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame’ (Job 29:15).

People with disabilities can offer spiritual insights into physical, emotional, and social suffering that the church desperately needs to hear.

While it is true that obstacles may be physical, such as the need for a ramp or a rail, some of the most stubborn obstacles are conceptual. These include biblical misinterpretations and theological misunderstandings. For example, some people think that a Leviticus passage forbidding God’s people from having priests with disabilities means that Christian leaders cannot have disabilities. However, the passage in fact applies to qualifications for the Aaronic line of priests for the nation of Israel in temple worship, not leaders in the church.

Social misunderstandings are another obstacle. In some regions of the world, there are those who still believe that people with disabilities are contagious and must be isolated. Others believe that demons cause disabilities. Consequently, people with disabilities must receive spiritual deliverance through painful or debilitating rituals. These taboos, and others like them, destroy personal relationships for a group of people that may already be isolated due to the nature of their disability. Blindness, lack of hearing, or inability to speak or move without assistance all cut off people from the relationships they need.

A third type of obstacle is ideological in nature. These tend to arise from the cultures in which we live. Because they are so deeply embedded in our worldviews, that is, our assumptions about reality, these are some of the most difficult obstacles to recognize. They can be even harder to remove. We just take them as givens of society.

One ideological assumption says that people with disabilities cannot care for themselves. However, not only is this incorrect, but it holds people with disabilities back from
succeeding, destroys their self-confidence, and causes them to doubt that they could ever achieve their goals in life. This assumption prevents people with disabilities from becoming leaders in local churches. The best that they can hope for is to receive charity.

Unfortunately, this mistaken thinking is difficult to correct because those who care for them find fulfillment in so doing. Pastors and other church people must be cautious in their caring, for they can easily undermine the dignity of persons with disabilities by fostering overdependence on others. In caring for people with disabilities, we should strive to respect disability cultures, which are as diverse and complex as those found in any other cross-cultural ministry context. 

2. Open doors of opportunity for young leaders with disabilities

What do people with disabilities need in order to become local church and Christian organizational leaders? They need training and experience to develop their spiritual gifts; someone to widen opportunities for them; assistance in extending their influence; and promotion by other leaders. Then those people with disabilities whom God has called and gifted can assume their God-given leadership roles to evangelize (Matt 28:18-20), equip (Eph 4:10-12), and entrust the gospel (2 Tim 2:1-2) into the hands of other qualified leaders, ideally others with disabilities.

Who will lead the way? Who will remove the obstacles standing in the way of the growth in ministry of people with disabilities and open doors of opportunity, so that those who are appropriately gifted and called can fulfill their God-given mission? We—the current leaders of churches and organizations—are the only ones who can do this. Only we can nurture, train, and invite young people with disabilities into leadership roles, and consequently, change the local church and Christian leadership culture.

This message is for colleagues all around the world who lead the church of this age with God-given skill and compassion. Please consider the following suggestions that will help to open doors for young people with disabilities to become local church leaders:

- Encourage a young person with a disability to use their gifts in church and to find their calling or vocation.
- Invite a young person with a disability to work alongside you in a leadership role, providing mentorship and assistance as (and only when) needed.
- Lead the way in placing called, gifted, and trained people with disabilities in local church and Christian organizational and leadership roles.
Conclusion

What will leaders with disabilities accomplish? Far more than we might think. By removing obstacles and opening doors of opportunity for people with disabilities to seek leadership roles, the church will discover that many people with disabilities are gifted deacons, teachers, pastors, and missionaries.  

What is more, these individuals with disabilities will have the insights, empathy, access, and relationships essential to reach into the disability communities to evangelize, equip, and train the next generation of effective disability leaders.

Finally, other people with disabilities will see leaders with disabilities in their effective roles, be encouraged, and respond by moving from passive to active, as served one to server, watcher to worker, and maybe even lay person to church leader. Opening doors for young leaders with disabilities will be a ministry beyond our wildest dreams and bring us irresistible joy.

Endnotes


2. Of John Stott’s desire, Alister Chapman says, ‘As he neared the end of his own life, his ambitions focused more and more on others, on making them more useful in the kingdom of God.’ Alister Chapman, Godly Ambition: John Stott and the Evangelical Movement (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 151.

3. Former Lausanne Executive Chairman Doug Birdsall says, ‘Lausanne has a history of younger leader development. . . . That investment is producing very significant dividends for the cause of world evangelization as they have brought a surge of energy and creativity into the Movement.’ Doug Birdsall, ‘Lausanne Movement Leadership Transition Underway’, Lausanne Movement, 27 Nov 2012, https://www.lausanne.org/about/blog/lausanne-movement-leadership-transition-underway-2.

4. ‘Leadership development is the crucial bottleneck to Church growth. . . . Those who accurately and effectively expound the Scriptures are few, especially in areas where the churches are growing rapidly. New methods and means of multiplying well-trained, godly, effective leaders must be developed.’ Jason Mandryk, Operation World: The Definitive Prayer Guide to Every Nation (Denver, Colorado: Biblica Publishing, 2010), 17. Equipping people with disabilities to reach their spheres of influence fulfills every detail of this proposal.

5. The Lausanne Movement has committed to ‘encourage the development of emerging leaders within that focus area, especially younger leaders and women leaders, mentoring one or two for leadership within the network’ (Catalyst role description). This commitment includes people with disabilities.

6. Some estimates are as high as 15%, although the number varies from one region to another. Laura M Stough and Donghyun Kang, ‘The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and Persons with Disabilities’, International Journal of Disaster Risk Science 6 (2015), 140. This group includes people with cognitive disabilities and mental illness.


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8. The Cape Town Commitment, II-B-4.


15. John Piper reminds us, ‘We don’t own culture, and we don’t rule it. We serve it with joy and mercy, for the good of man and the glory of Jesus Christ.’ John Piper, ‘Brokenhearted Joy’, World Magazine, 13 December 2003, 51.


18. Joni Eareckson Tada has said, ‘Disability ministry is not disability ministry unless the disabled are ministering’ at Ministry Access: The Lausanne Consultation on Disability Concerns, conducted at the International Disability Center of Joni and Friends in Agoura Hills, California, on 21 February 2015. This event followed the 2015 Global Access Conference and served as preparation for the Lausanne Younger Leaders Conference (YLG2016) to be held in Jakarta, Indonesia, on 3–10 August 2016.

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Image on page 26 entitled ‘The Welcome Door’ ©Hyatt Moore is also used with permission. This painting illustrates the door of opportunity awaiting young leaders with disabilities called and gifted for local church leadership.

Hyatt Moore was also invited as an artist to the third Lausanne Congress held in Cape Town, South Africa, 2010, and painted during and for the Congress.
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